

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO STUDY

1.0 Introduction

Language learning comprises of four main skills which include the ability to read and to process information read. Reading is to language learning as a compass is to direction. Without good reading and comprehension skills, a learner may not truly be able to unearth treasures of knowledge that are embedded in the written works of his forefathers or even his own contemporaries.

Due to the significance of reading in learning as a whole, emphasis is given to this area of learning, in particular, the learning of the English Language in Malaysian schools. Although reading is simply defined as "...extracting information from text" (Smith, 82:104), it is quite a complex skill for a learner to learn. No one can actually claim to have mastered this skill well enough to stop at any one stage or another. Melnik and Merritt (1972:7) quoted Goethe (1969) as saying that people do not know that reading is a long time process and even he could not say that he had already achieved it fully. This aptly sums up how the acquisition of the reading skill is not a one-time process.

1.1 Background to the problem

A lot has been said regarding the importance of reading particularly in the Malaysian context and the interest to read especially in English is lacking in many of the learners. This is evidenced from an article in *The Sunday Star* which states that it was common knowledge that Malaysians possess poor reading habits (Education, Aug. 8, 1999 : 2). This problem has caught the attention of the Ministry of Education so much so that various reading programmes have been introduced to make the learners aware of the importance of acquiring the reading skill. *The Sunday Star* continues to say that “to show its seriousness, the ministry issued a circular on the need to address the reading problem among students.” (Aug. 8, 1999:2). Programmes such as the Class Reading Programme (CRP) and the latest ‘Nilam’ programme are meant to instil in learners a desire to read and read more extensively as everyone realises that reading matters and it causes a major difference in a person’s life. According to Melnik and Merritt (1972:8), reading is seen

“as a complex process integrating all aspects of human behaviour and demanding varied and continued instructional guidance to read accurately and efficiently, to appraise what is read, and to relate what is read in a significant way to other areas of life.”

The ability to read well which includes comprehension skills is vital. If students cannot comprehend sufficiently the materials they have read, they may encounter difficulty in assessing information they read in a critical manner which may mean they find it quite arduous to synthesize information in order to give a coherent answer to some questions. They would be heavily dependent on the information or the solutions they found in the given texts or other sources as their only avenues in dealing with certain

situations. However, some schools such as the International School of Kuala Lumpur practise teaching students more than basic literal reading comprehension skills which is reflected in the school's philosophy "... that our students think creatively," and "... reason critically..."(Sunday Star, Aug. 8, 1999: 3). Students here are given books to read and encouraged to share about them without the fear of being penalised for giving wrong answers which can help to promote the reading and thinking habit. Thinking skills which include the ability to see different solutions or make different decisions which may not be of the stereotyped kind need to be developed in learners. A very relevant statement raised regarding such a need was mentioned by Artley as quoted in Robbins (1996: 208) which emphasised the teaching of critical reading skills to students in order to enable them to contribute positively towards the solving of national and international problems.

One possible reason as to why most students are not able to think critically is probably the fact that not enough emphasis is given to take learners through the higher order skills of comprehension where more than literal recall of facts is needed. A lot of reading comprehension exercises concentrate largely on literal comprehension skills while many of the listed skills found in Barrett's Reading Taxonomy (Clymer : 1968) are given very little attention. Very few higher order skills questions of synthesizing, analysing and appreciation are asked in reading lessons to develop the critical reading ability of students.

Time constraint could be a reason why questions set for the reading lessons are basically of the lower comprehension levels. Nevertheless, if questions of the higher-

order skills are set which require more time on the part of the students to answer them, then the number of questions could be correspondingly reduced in keeping with the time allowance for the lesson. According to Robbins (1996 : 209), “controversial issues – which are the breeding ground for critical and creative reading – are thus frequently taboo.” In order to develop the ability in learners to think critically, they must therefore be given the opportunities to discuss their opinions. The teacher as a facilitator needs to be able to keep discussion situations under control by reminding students that they should never allow emotional reactions to ruin the discussions. The teacher should sum up the points discussed by both parties and allow the students to think about them. Only by being given opportunities to discuss issues raised through their reading can learners learn ways to handle such situations logically and critically when required.

One other factor which could also be the cause that little consideration is given to the development of the critical reading skills is the lack of confidence in teachers to develop these skills since not many training programmes of such kind have been initiated for teachers. Again to quote Robbins (1996 : 209) “most teachers have been trained in schools that did not explore the teaching of critical or creative reading.” Thus even if they are interested, they may not know where or how to begin the teaching of such skills.

Hence, it is very important for teachers to instill higher level comprehension skills in their students so as to help them to develop critical thinking abilities.

Teaching comprehension questions that cover a variety of skills including inferring,

appreciating, evaluating and synthesising is essential in helping students to acquire greater thinking skills.

1.2 Background of Sek. Men. Keb. Bukit Saujana, Port Dickson (SMKBS)

SMKBS is an A grade school with an approximate enrolment of about 1800 students ranging from the Remove to Form Five classes. It is a school in a semi-rural area where most of its students are from average income families. A majority of the students' parents work with the armed forces. Students here have mostly below average to average proficiency in the English Language as can be seen from their examination results and class tests. Nevertheless, many of the students who are placed in the Science Stream based on their results in the Lower Secondary School Assessment or Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) also did quite well in the English Language by scoring either an A, a B or a C in their English Language paper for the PMR examination. Students who failed in the English Language paper for this examination generally had great difficulty in learning the English Language or to read, and to answer questions of the higher level of the comprehension taxonomy would pose a great problem to them. Skills in Bahasa Malaysia is seen as more than sufficient by them and is also a logical choice for them to communicate both orally and in writing.

Nonetheless, there is a very small percentage of students who can communicate reasonably well and understand the English Language at the chosen school. This group of students would normally pass the English Language tests with slightly above average scores of 65 -70. The subjects for this study are a group of Science students because

they make up the group that had done fairly well in their PMR examinations and are generally better in the English Language proficiency. These students can read and understand reading materials in English better than the other classes and should thus be better able to use higher order reading skills.

SMKBS is chosen for this study since the researcher realises from her own experience that most of these students have not been given sufficient practice to read critically. It was discovered that these students are mostly asked comprehension questions which require them to locate answers from the text directly. Very few, if any, comprehension questions of the higher order variety were asked. So it is with the aim of finding out how capable these Science students are in managing higher order comprehension questions that this research was conducted.

1.3 Statement of problem

The researcher having taught English language in this school for three years found that many of her students are not able to answer questions that require analysing, synthesizing as well as evaluating critically since the emphasis of comprehension questions in many instances have been mostly of the literal kind including those set by the researcher. Thus, the researcher is most interested to find out whether these students can actually answer questions of the higher order levels which could then lead to the development of critical reading and thinking skills including interpreting, reorganising and inferring questions based on both the narrative and expository texts provided.

1.4 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to find out whether:

- 1) these students are as capable in answering higher level comprehension questions as they could for literal comprehension questions in narrative and expository texts.
- 2) students' Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) English Language scores of A, B or C makes a difference in their ability to answer higher level comprehension questions relating to narrative and expository texts.

1.5 Research Questions

This study sets out to address the following questions:

- a) can the chosen subjects give relevant and appropriate answers to higher level comprehension questions raised in the narrative and expository texts?
- b) are the subjects' ability to answer higher level comprehension questions in narrative and expository texts affected by their PMR English Language scores?

1.6 Significance of the study

It is hoped that from looking at the kinds of answers and distribution, more materials and exercises can be developed to enable students to experience answering literal and higher level comprehension questions, thus in a way enabling them to develop better critical reading skills. Most students will need these kinds of skills especially when they reach the tertiary education level.

It is hoped that the teaching of higher level comprehension skills which could lead to the development of critical reading ability would be given more attention in future reading lessons and that learners would be taught not to fear that the answer they have given is the wrong answer to an open-ended comprehension question. Having this ability will enable students to be more articulate and more willing to give their opinions on any matter to be discussed without being worried that they would be penalised for saying or giving the wrong answer.

1.7 Students' PMR English Language Score

The PMR English Language examination consists of two papers with Paper I being an objective multiple-choice question paper on grammar and comprehension as well as language functions. Paper II on the other hand, requires the students to write an essay of about one hundred words and also consists of a cloze passage where ten blanks are given for students to fill in with suitable words.

Students who scored an A or a B are normally considered good students and have done reasonably well in the examination. The study hopes to find out whether the students' results affected the way they answer the different kinds of questions.

1.8 Limitations to the study

As this study is only based on a limited number of subjects, that is, students of the Form Five Science class in SMKBS, it would not be valid to claim across the board that

its significance holds true for every Form Five student in the country or all students for that matter. The scope of study is also limited in the sense that it is conducted only in a semi-rural school and based only on narrative and expository materials. Different schools in different settings may present different outcomes in a similar study.